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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002152

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HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM ASEC VE

SUBJECT: CHAVEZ SUPPORTERS FIRE ON OPPOSITION STUDENTS

REF: CARACAS 002142 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶11. (C) Summary. Supporters of President Chavez opened fire on opposition demonstrators November 7, seriously injuring at least two students. Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) officials accuse opposition demonstrators of trying to "lynch" pro-Chavez students on campus, while opposition students allege that the pro-Chavez students started the violence and responded during student clashes disproportionately with gunfire. Earlier the same day, tens of thousands of opposition students marched peacefully to the Supreme Court to request postponement of the December 2 constitutional referendum. Student marches in major cities throughout Venezuela also led to further clashes with state security forces and attacks by Chavez supporters. While it is unclear whether senior BRV officials are behind the scattered attacks on constitutional reform opponents, the potential for further political violence may be growing. End Summary.

Students Clash at UCV; 9 Injured

¶12. (SBU) After marching peacefully earlier in the day to the Supreme Court, some opposition students returned to the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) campus. Chavez supporters reportedly opened fire on some of the opposition students with pellet guns. Video shown on a government-owned TV station showed a large group of opposition students responding by throwing rocks and subsequently trapping dozens of pro-Chavez students in a classroom in the School of Social Work. The students inside called for support from the extreme left-wing Tupamaro party, and a group, presumably of Tupamaro members, many of them masked and armed with pistols, arrived on campus a short while later on motorcycles.

¶13. (SBU) Opposition cable network Globovision aired video of the Tupamaros firing shots in the direction of the opposition students and escorting the pro-Chavez students out of the Social Work faculty classroom and off campus. Opposition students continued to throw rocks, and the Tupamaros responded by periodically shooting in the direction of the rock-throwers. According to university officials, nine students were injured in the UCV student clash, two seriously. At no point during the disturbances did BRV police or National Guard enter the campus. UCV enjoys

special status as an autonomous university, and state security forces are prohibited from entering the campus unless requested to do so by senior university officials. They were not requested.

¶4. (SBU) Opposition-oriented media outlets are calling the UCV violence an ambush by Chavez supporters. Interior and Justice Minister Pedro Carreno accused opposition students of trying to "lynch" pro-Chavez students putting up posters in favor of constitutional reform and credited Civil Protection personnel with preventing more widespread violence at UCV. Caracas Mayor Juan Barreto urged a theater audience of Chavez supporters November 7 to go on a "counteroffensive" and activate a civilian anti-coup network. He urged Chavistas to engage in 24-hour patrols of public plazas and institutions in the capital to prevent "fascists" from taking control of public spaces.

Peaceful March to the Supreme Court

¶5. (SBU) Earlier the same day, tens of thousands of university students marched peacefully to the Supreme Court in central Caracas on November 7. Upon reaching the Supreme Court, a small student delegation led by Yon Goicochea delivered a request to the judges that the December 2 referendum on President Chavez' proposed sweeping changes to the constitution be postponed until February 2008. The university students argue that the Venezuelan public has not had sufficient time to evaluate Chavez' proposals to change 69 articles of the 350-article 1999 Constitution. Chavez submitted proposals to change 33 articles to the National Assembly on August 15 and the National Assembly, in consultation with Chavez, incorporated changes to an additional 36 articles in late October.

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¶6. (SBU) Unlike the student's November 1 march on the National Electoral Council in which state security forces dispersed student marchers with tear gas, the student march on the Supreme Court took place without any major incidents. Interior and Justice Minister Pedro Carreno met with student leaders on November 6 to elicit student commitment to peaceful protest in return for state security force cooperation. Just as they did in June marches to protest the government closure of RCTV, many student marchers painted their hands white to symbolize their commitment to non-violence.

Students Protests Continue Nationwide

¶7. (SBU) University students in several states across Venezuela also marched against the constitutional referendum on November 7. Armed and masked Chavez supporters reportedly injured five students and a journalist in Lara state. University students marched peacefully to a high court in the western state in Tachira November 7, but complained that later the same day that armed and masked Chavez supporters vandalized buildings at the private Catholic University of Tachira. State security forces used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse a student demonstration in Chavez' native state of Barinas.

Comment

¶8. (C) While it is not clear that senior BRV officials ordered the November 7 attacks on university demonstrators, allowing Chavez sympathizers to attack opposition activists with impunity is a long-standing tactic of the BRV, including during June student demonstrations against RCTV's closure.

President Chavez' incendiary rhetoric against opponents of his sweeping constitutional changes may also be fueling the violent actions of some supporters eager to demonstrate their "revolutionary zeal". Nevertheless, a pattern of increased pro-Chavez violence against constitutional reform opponents may be emerging and the potential for increasing political confrontations and violence in Venezuela is growing.

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